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Basildon Council votes to evict Dale Farm



Pat Sheridan, protesting outside the meeting in Basildon last night. Photo: www.maryturner.photoshelter.com

A community of Irish Travellers fighting to stay on the biggest encampment in Europe should be evicted, Basildon Council ruled last night. The 1,000 people living at Dale Farm in Essex will be cleared from their homes at a cost of £18 million if legal moves to block the eviction fail.

Several hundred members of the public, including Travellers from Dale Farm, gathered to hear the debate last night at a packed meeting at the Towergate Theatre in Basildon. The vote was passed by 26 votes to 10 with Conservative councillors voting for, and Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors voting against.

Council leader Tony Ball said that the government had failed to recognise the scale of the issue when they refused to fund the Dale farm eviction before dedicating £8million, a third of the council's annual budget, towards the eviction. Essex Police has applied for a further £10 million towards the eviction which the government has so far refused to fund.

A statement from the residents of Dale Farm said: 'A peaceful solution to what must unavoidably become a long-drawn out and violent confrontation is already on the table.'

'The Gypsy Council has put in a planning application to develop a model alternative mobile park on land belonging to the Homes and Communities Agency at Pound Lane and is preparing to submit further applications shortly for several Brownfield sites in the area of Gardiners Lane South. They

would be financed through a £60 million central government fund set up for this purpose, and would cost Basildon nothing.'



Jean Sheridan dresses her daughter Vivianna, aged 4yrs, in her Sunday Best clothes, with little brother Richard pictured behind. Jean's family have been at Dale Farm since Travellers arrived there in 2001, and they have nowhere to go should they be evicted this year. June 2009. Photo: www.maryturner.photoshelter.com

Even before Basildon Tory councillors voted to evict Dale Farm's homeless, a legal challenge to the £13m operation had been set in motion. During the day, Basildon District Council was faxed a pre-action protocol letter stating that should the council proceed with direct action it would immediately be countered by judicial review proceedings.

The community now hopes that this strongly stated legal opposition to Basildon's policy will at least gain time for a non-confrontational solution to be reached. Opposition councillors said at the meeting that they would rather see the families involved allowed to continue to live on their own land, than have millions in public money squandered on an eviction.

"I believe welfare of the community should be the priority," commented Gypsy Council president Richard Sheridan this morning. "We want to live within the law. There is no law-and-order issue."

In earlier negotiations Cllr Ball himself has indicated that he is willing to allow Dale Farm residents at least a limited window of opportunity to find alternative locations to which they can legally and peacefully move. On balance it seems unlikely therefore that the 28-day notice of eviction will be delivered to residents for some weeks yet.

The Gypsy Council and lawyers for residents are urging that negotiations regarding suitable alternative sites be re-established. One planning application for development of a model mobile-home park is already awaiting council approval, and several others also involving land owned, and offered, by the Homes and Communities Agency are in preparation.



Jean Sheridan puts her two year old boys Richard, Dennis and John Button, to bed in their trailer at Dale Farm, Crays Hill, Essex, from which they are expectin to be evictin in the coming months, and from where and their extended family will have nowhere to go.
February 2011. Photo: www.maryturner.photoshelter.com

Meanwhile, linking with this Irish Traveller community with Romany communities in other parts of Europe, many of whom are under similar threat, Dale Farm will on 9th April host one of the events marking the 40th anniversary of the 1st World Romani Congress, which took place in London in 1971.

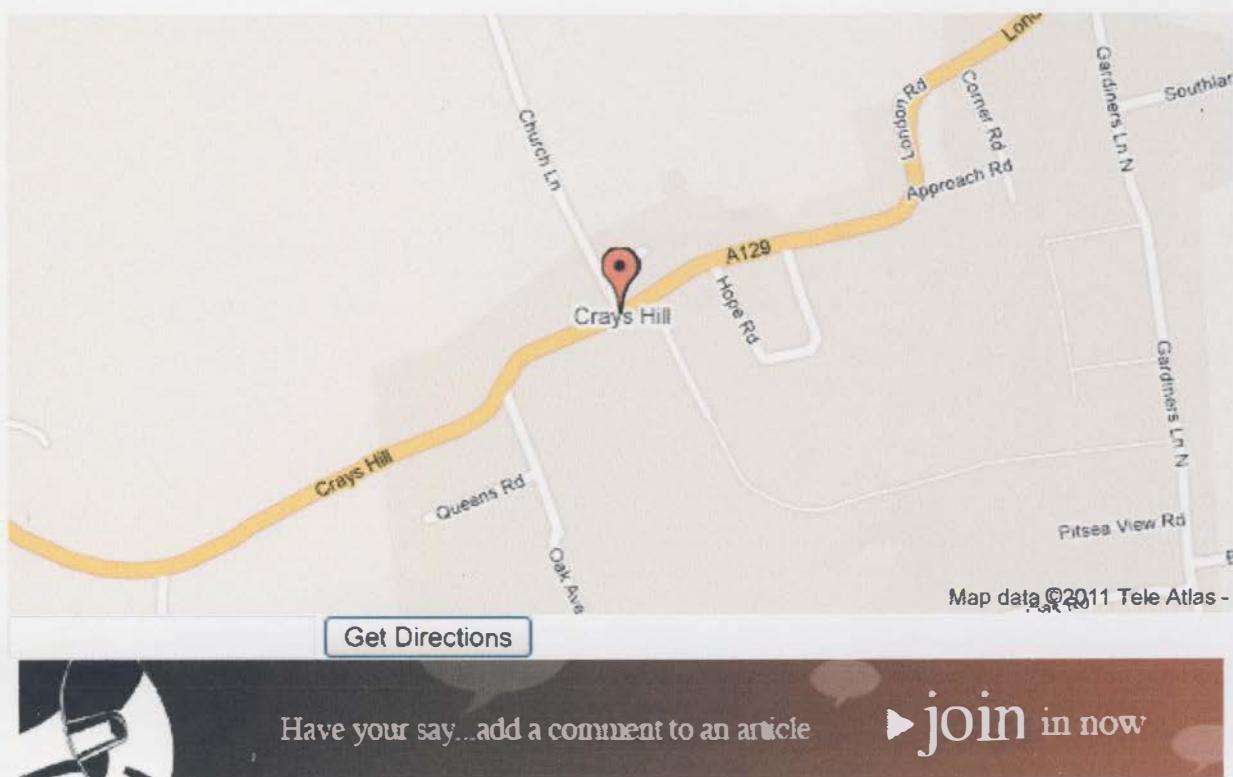
That weekend will see the setting up of Camp Constant, a support establishment composed of human rights monitors pledged to be on hand should a forced eviction be prematurely attempted.

Watch this digital story by photographer Mary Turner, or see other pictures of the community here: (www.maryturner.photoshelter.com)



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